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Bible Translators: The Word for the World

By Russell Chandler
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Early on the morning of March 7, a shopkeeper in Bogota, Colombia, ran across the street, banged on the outside gate of a residence where Brenda Bitterman was staying, and shouted a message she had hoped she would never hear.

"They've found Cher's body in a bus!"

Almost seven weeks had passed since her husband, linguist Chester A. Bitterman, III, 28, had been kidnapped by leftist terrorists. They said they would kill him unless his organization, the Wycliffe Bible Translators, withdrew all 209 of its people from Colombia.

The Huntington Beach, Calif.-based translation organization and its overseas arm, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), refused to yield during the 48 tense days of threats, rumors and deadlines.

The world's largest Bible translation group has been working — quietly, for the most part — for 50 years among remote peoples whose languages are unwritten.

"Until 1972, our work drew basically praise, commendation and good press," Jerry Elder, the Summer Institute's Latin America director, said during an interview. "We have cooperated with the academic world and the national governments."

Most of the criticism and suspicion of Wycliffe, its leaders believe, stem from the "radical critique of capitalistic society" voiced by "Western intelligentsia," particularly activist students and some liberal church leaders.

The Summer Institute was or-

dered out of Ecuador this year, and critics who nearly succeeded in forcing its workers out of Peru in 1976, have caused problems for SIL in Mexico and Brazil as well as in Colombia. Bitterman was not the first Wycliffe worker to be killed; one was shot by kidnapers in Vietnam during the war, at least one other worker was murdered and several others have been taken hostage but released unharmed.

Rumors of Wycliffe spy connections have been fueled by the presence of SIL planes and radios in remote areas.

Wycliffe workers — like other missionaries — often come across information that could be valuable to CIA undercover agents.

The Rev. George Cotter, a Maryknoll priest who has been a missionary in Tanzania and Latin America, said in a recent article in Christian Century magazine that "because missionaries spend years working with grass-roots people and helping the unfortunates among them, they win trust and confidence.

"They learn who are the most promising leaders, what are the region's problems, and they are often given access to people and areas closed to most outsiders."

Cotter suggests that CIA agents spin intricate communications webs through which they could elicit sensitive information from naive missionaries.

Allegations that Wycliffe is a front for the CIA have been strongly rejected by government officials as well as by Wycliffe leaders. The latter say any SIL worker connected with the CIA "would immediately be cut off."

Wycliffe workers raise their own salaries through gifts from individuals and churches in their home countries and are not paid through

SIL does receive project money, however, from the U.S. Agency for International Development, Canadian and European international development agencies and host countries. Combined 1980 income for SIL and Wycliffe entities was \$35 million, 90 percent of it from private contributions. Field programs account for 75 percent of the organization's expenses; administration and fund raising, 16 percent.

Host governments often provide certain privileges and facilities for SIL workers, such as office space, visas and waivers or reductions of normal duties or taxes. Governments also often take major responsibility for the safety of SIL workers in exchange for accomplishment of government-assigned literacy projects.

Political groups that oppose a regime in power are apt to oppose SIL as well because of the cooperative relationship between the two.

Said George Cowan, Wycliffe's president: "Our policy is active cooperation with host governments. Yet we have never so bound ourselves to any government that we were forced to assume its tactics or be dependent on its political continuance."

Groups such as the Inter-American Indian Congress and the North American Congress on Latin America voice political opposition to Wycliffe. They say SIL represents a kind of velvet-glove approach to "civilizing" indigenous peoples, paving the way for exploitation.
